



VILAS COUNTY

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

— 2023 ANNUAL REPORT —

See Broadband
Expansion
page 5



A Message

From the Board Chairman

Jim Tuckwell



“I think perhaps the best way to think of this, is to imagine “What if there were no VCEDC?””

Dear Friends,

The Vilas County Economic Development Corporation (VCEDC), a 501c3 non-profit organization, is comprised of a volunteer, working board of directors including local, regional, and national business leaders who share a passion for the Northwoods and who are dedicated to helping to diversify and grow Vilas County’s economy, leveraging and sustaining Vilas County’s unique strengths.

We’re very fortunate to have Kathy Schmitz, our Executive Director who is a key and valued member of our team and is critical to our success. I want to thank the Vilas County Board of Supervisors, the Lac du Flambeau Tribe, Nicolet College, our business community, the community at large, VCEDC donors, and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) for their support, without which we couldn’t accomplish the results that we’ll share with you in this annual report. I’d also like to especially thank our Board of Directors, Kathy, and VCEDC Professional Volunteers for providing the leadership, services, and support that we offer, all at no charge, to Vilas County businesses.

I have had the privilege of serving as Board Chairman of this organization for the past six years, and would like to take a minute to share what I believe it means for Vilas County to have this skilled, experienced, and

committed team supporting our Vilas County business community.

I think perhaps the best way to think of this, is to imagine “What if there were no VCEDC?” Where would the dozens of entrepreneurs and small businesses that we support each year turn to for help to start and grow their business? How much longer would it take them to become successful or worse yet, how many might fail, and how many jobs could be impacted without the commitment and support that we offer?

Vilas County’s broadband expansion is far ahead of the vast majority of counties north of Hwy 64. How would the rollout of broadband across Vilas County that we are seeing today have happened without the leadership, skills, and very significant time commitment made by the VCEDC Broadband Workgroup?

I’m very proud of the return on investment the VCEDC provides to the Vilas County Board, our donors, and our granting institutions. This leads to a growing tax base in Vilas County and improved quality of life for all of us. I’m grateful to be part of such a wonderful team.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Tuckwell". The signature is fluid and cursive.



A Message From the Executive Director

Kathy Schmitz



“When I look back on 2023, a poignant question stands out, “How do we want to shape where we live?”

Dear Friends,

Our leadership on three key initiatives: broadband expansion, one-on-one business support, and broad business engagement is how we answer that question – helping to shape and strengthen Vilas County as a diverse, welcoming, and premier year-round place to live and work – where success becomes a reality. This makes a huge difference in our quality of life and economy. Let’s take business support.

The one comment that we hear repeatedly, is that the work we do supports business owners to live their dreams, by being a one-stop shop – if you will – of local, regional, national, and international business experts to navigate the uncertainty of how to start a business, grant and loan options and applications, taxes, accounting, developing a business plan, marketing, and social media. This is all so they can focus on what they do best, what they’re good at – managing their restaurants, gift shops, resorts, hair salons, farm and garden centers, pet stores, manufacturing, HVAC, and so many others – businesses that you and I rely on.

Our broad business support in 2023 also included forward-thinking educational opportunities such as E-commerce and AI, presented by local and national experts, with the latter including CBS News Correspondent David Pogue. And, our education extended to inspiring the next generation of entrepreneurs when we welcomed Craig Culver,

Co-Founder and Former CEO of Culvers and a panel of local business owners to speak to nearly 600 students at Northland Pines High School. What an honor to partner with such a distinguished educational institution.

The year culminated in December at the 2023 Annual Meeting when we were delighted to host the topic of ‘Bridging Innovation’ with guest Craig Dickman, CEO of Tiletown Tech from Green Bay. We continue to get asked by colleagues in the Northwoods and throughout the state, “How are you able to accomplish all of this?”

As some of you may know, I joined the VCEDC as Executive Director four years ago for one primary reason – the opportunity to work alongside Board Chairman Jim Tuckwell and our Board of Directors – with their passion, dedication, and commitment. They are business leaders volunteering thousands of hours, working with me day-to-day, including early mornings, evenings, and weekends, to find solutions, and provide leadership to positively impact real lives, and communities – one family, one town, at a time.

Our Mission is stronger than ever - creating a strong, diverse Northwoods economy. It’s about striving to be even better than we are today – shaping where we live.

Kathy M. Schmitz



Lead the rollout of high-speed broadband throughout Vilas County.

Provide one-on-one business support for Vilas County entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Support the Vilas County business community at large through education and events promoting Vilas County as an ideal location to live and work year-round.

In their own words

"A lot of times we start our businesses out of having a passion for something, but then the business side can be really tricky. Finding the people who are experts in those areas can really help you be successful.

The Vilas County EDC has been really helpful in connecting me with other resources and people who have helped me with tax questions, and accounting, and finding funding for my business."

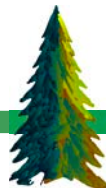
**- Tasha Sookochoff
Wander Wild Farm, Eagle River**

"The Vilas County EDC is just a terrific organization. The background, the experience of the people on the board, the people involved. I don't think you can get too much good information."

**- Dan Beihoff
Eagle River Roasters**

"The Vilas County EDC helped us get a grant, opened up the door for us to literally be able to open. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here right at this moment."

**- Chef Matt Prochaska
The Outdoorsman Restaurant,
Boulder Junction**





\$70M
Investment

13,000
Homes & Businesses

90%
Coverage

Vilas County – A Broadband Destination

In Q1 2020, we made the decision to lead the rollout of broadband throughout Vilas County. When we began, Bill Niemuth, VCEDC board member and broadband team leader cautioned us that, "Broadband is hard work!" We learned that it certainly is, but we are now seeing the culmination of almost four years of dedication and the investment of countless hours in bringing broadband to Vilas County.



There are currently just over \$70M in broadband projects that are either completed, underway, or funded and approved bringing high speed broadband to 13,000 Vilas County homes and businesses. That's just over half of the living units in Vilas County!

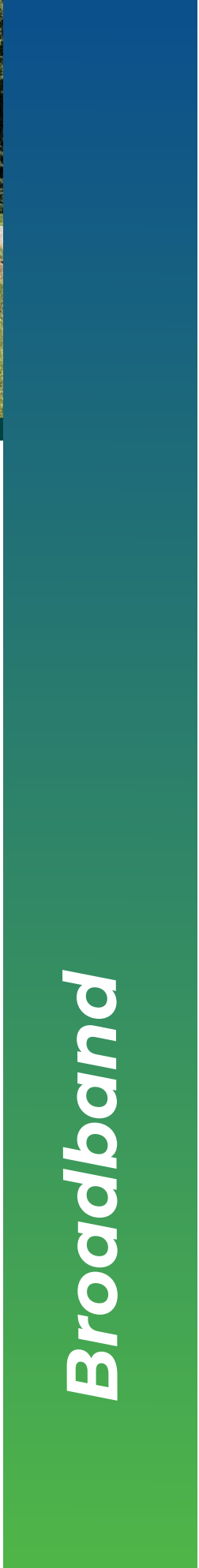
The VCEDC has been key to the grant projects that are underway in Arbor Vitae, Cloverland, Conover, Lincoln, Presque Isle, and Manitowish Waters. In one case, writing most of the grant request ourselves.

Because of the working relationship we have developed with Charter Spectrum, they have given Vilas County a high priority for their federally funded Rural Digital Opportunity Fund or RDOF projects, meaning these projects began last year and are continuing to bring fiber to Vilas County now, instead of years in the future.

We're proud to be part of the Lac du Flambeau Tribe's Broadband Workgroup and contribute to the development of Eighth Fire

Communications, the tribe's new Internet Service Provider that will bring fiber to homes and businesses on the Lac du Flambeau reservation.

Looking ahead, the VCEDC will continue to lead this vital work effort. Though given the rural nature of our county, it's not realistic to think that we'll have fiber to every home in Vilas County. Our goal is to have fiber to up to 90% of Vilas County living units by the end of 2026. We're confident that will be achieved.





VCEDC Board Chairman Jim Tuckwell (left) and VCEDC Executive Director Kathy Schmitz (third from right) hosted Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) Secretary & CEO Missy Hughes (4th from left), Mike Ward (2nd from left), Vice President, Business and Community Development; Jim Rosenberg (right), Regional Economic Director, for a tour of Conover Gardens with owners Pat Indermuehl (3rd from left) and Robin Indermuehl (2nd from right) to discuss their plans for future expansions.

We provided a leadership role in directly supporting more than 62 Vilas County businesses in 2023.

Here are a few ways that we helped:

- In-depth consultations with business owners or entrepreneurs who wanted to start or grow a business.

The top main support topics are:

- Developing a Business Plan
 - Referrals to Entrepreneur Classes
 - Digital Marketing
 - Grant Assistance and Research
 - Business Financing
- Plus, our work included website consultations, and the development of 21 marketing videos featuring business owners telling their stories and marketing those videos to a regional, state, and national audience.



Inspiring the Next Generation of Entrepreneurs

The Vilas County Economic Development Corporation welcomed Craig Culver, Co-Founder and Former CEO of Culvers to be the featured guest at a special Entrepreneur Event on October 4th at Northland Pines High

School. Six hundred high school and middle school students had the opportunity to hear Culver's journey to success as well as a diverse panel of four entrepreneurs from Vilas County who shared their remarkable stories.



Craig Culver, Co-Founder and Former CEO of Culvers



Event Partner/Panel (l to r): Jim Tuckwell, Jonathan Sharp, Luke Olejniczak, Kathy Schmitz, Craig Culver, Brooke Veldt, and Clay Veldt.



Craig Culver answers questions from the students during the Q&A portion of Culver's presentation, moderated by Kathy Schmitz.



Craig Culver, Kathy Schmitz, Jim Tuckwell

The VCEDC, with grant support from Associated Bank, develops regularly scheduled Lunch & Learn educational programs featuring topics such as:

- E-Commerce
- How Will AI Impact Your Business?
- How to Finance Your Business
- AI Security, and,
- How to Attract Tourists to Your Business
- Broadband Expansion in Vilas County

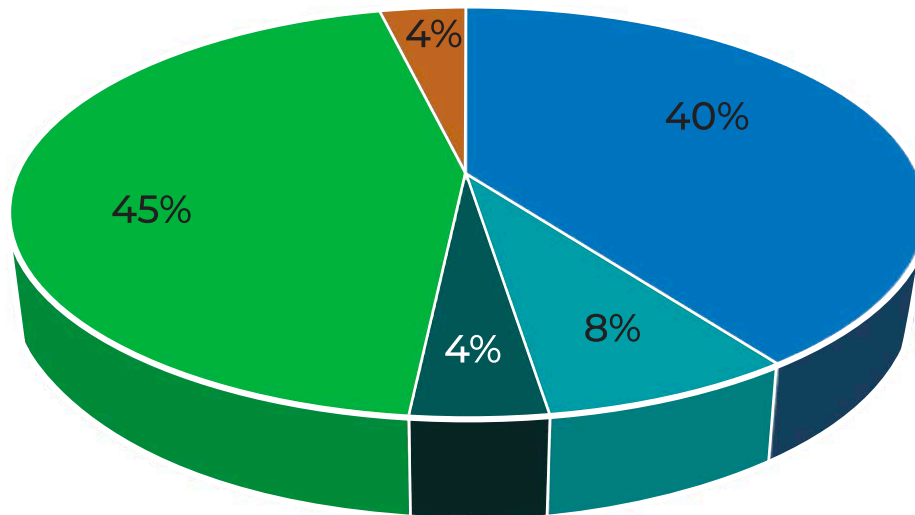
Total attendance at these events in 2023 was 203 people!

How did we impact the businesses that we worked with? Please take a moment to view the testimonial videos on our website from business owners who we've positively impacted with our support.

We encourage businesses, we help them get the information they need to either expand their business or start a business, and we connect them with VCEDC experts and our colleagues in the community and region. We help them tell their stories and grow their business, critical to their and our community's success.

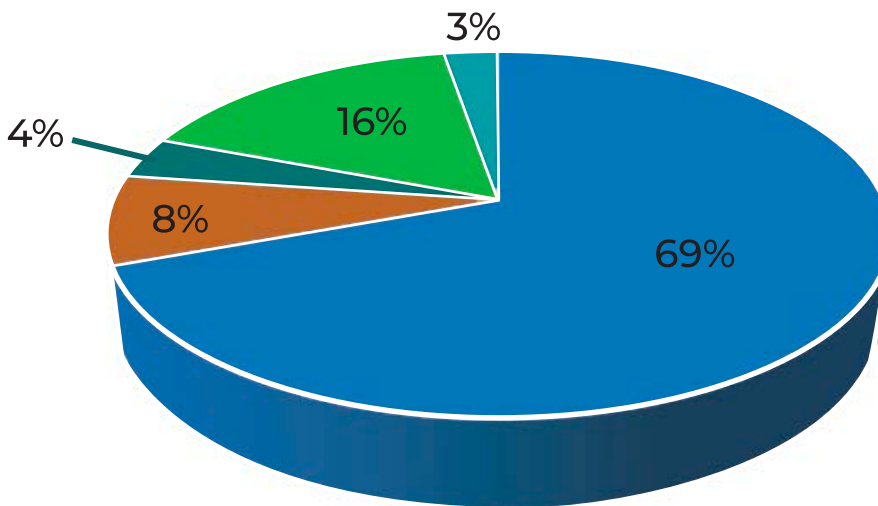


Income

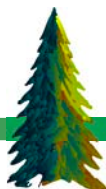


■ Vilas Co. ■ Board & Businesses ■ Towns ■ Grants ■ Other income

Expenses



■ Program Delivery ■ Operations ■ Communications and Social Media ■ Business Development ■ Other





Ice Shanty

Kathy Schmitz, Linda Reinowski



Outdoorsman Restaurant

Matt Prochaska, Kathy Schmitz



Bartling's Manitowish Cranberry Co.

Kathy Schmitz, Steve Bartling



Christine Marie's Northwoods Salon

Christine Karow, Marisue Drumm

Supporting more than 62 Vilas County businesses in 2023.



Charter Celebration Event

(L to R): Celeste Flynn, Charter Regional Sr. Director Government Affairs; State Sen. Mary Felzkowski; VCEDC Executive Dir. Kathy Schmitz; WI State Rep. Rob Swearingen; Bill Marshall, Town of Lincoln Broadband Rep.; Adam Raschka, Charter Senior Dir. of Government Affairs; Teri Hatchell, Charter Dir. of Government Affairs; and Jim Egan, Chair Town of Washington.



Iconik Etchings

Keith & Kayla Anderson, Marisue Drumm



Lac du Flambeau EighthFire Communications Groundbreaking Event

Real Business Impact



Business of the Month Awards

JANUARY TrackSide



Chris Petreikis, Kathy Schmitz

FEBRUARY Hooked & Tagged



Tom & Sarah Zidek with baby Emma

MARCH The Hiker Box



Tom & Jessica Allen

APRIL Conover Gardens



Robin & Pat Indermuehl with Kathy Schmitz

MAY VFW Post 8637



Dennis Gieseman, Kathy Schmitz

JUNE Eagle River Roasters



Dan & Susan Beihoff with Kathy Schmitz

JULY Aqualand Ale House



Jim Tuckwell, Joel Miner, Kathy Schmitz

AUGUST Private Chef Luke



Kathy Schmitz, Luke Olejniczak

SEPTEMBER Winman Trails



Isaac Cowart, Kathy Schmitz

OCTOBER Advanced Welding Institute



Kathy Huber, Kathy Schmitz

NOVEMBER Eagle River Tire



Shirley Egan, Kathy Schmitz

Business of the Year Award

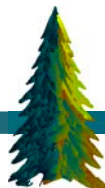
Congratulations!

Private Chef Luke



"It is truly an honor to be recognized with the VCEDC Business of the Year Award, especially with so many great businesses in the area. This road started out very humbly and has since blossomed into a wonderful journey full of blessings. It is wonderful to be rewarded in public for the practices and long days as an entrepreneur. I am grateful for this blessing and grateful for the VCEDC."

Chef Luke Olejniczak



VCEDC 2023 Board of Directors

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Kathy Schmitz

CHAIRMAN
Jim Tuckwell

VICE CHAIRMAN
Richard Nelson

TREASURER
Jon Chamberlain

SECRETARY
Elizabeth Duemmel

DIRECTORS
Kelly Cooper
Emerson Coy
Ty Erickson
Brad Gauthier
Patty Krarup
Noah Lottig
Peter Mouw
Joe Muehlbach
Bill Niemuth
Carolyn Ritter


EX OFFICIO
MEMBERS
Kate Ferrel
Jim Rosenberg



VCEDC Board Chairman Jim Tuckwell was honored to participate in the groundbreaking ceremony of the new Eighth Fire Communications, a \$25M broadband expansion venture in Lac du Flambeau.


Contact Us

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The VCEDC is a 501c3 non-profit.

Consider a Tax-deductible Donation Today.

